



VICTIM
SUPPORT
SERVICE
INCORPORATED

Submission to inform the Department for Correctional Services

Improving responses to women offenders and prisoners in correctional settings

April 2014

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Chief Executive
(08 8231 5626)

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Ms Bernie McGinnes
Principal Advisor Women Offenders
Offender Development Directorate
Department for Correctional Services
GPO Box 1747
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Dear Ms McGinnes,

Re: Improving responses to women offenders and prisoners involved in correctional settings

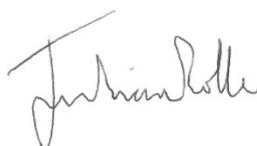
The Victim Support Service (VSS) welcomes the opportunity to participate in the consultation process to inform the Department for Correctional Services (DCS) in its responses to women offenders and prisoners in correctional settings.

VSS is a key service provider and leader in victim advocacy in South Australia. As such, we have a longstanding and strong interest in ensuring that the Government of South Australia continues to develop and implement strategies to prevent crime and victimisation.

The following submission provides comment on the DCS Consultation Paper. The submission also outlines recommendations for preventing crime by breaking the cycle of offending experienced by many women.

Please feel free to contact me should you wish to discuss any components of the VSS submission in more detail.

Yours sincerely,



Julian Roffe
Chief Executive

Contents

About the Victim Support Service1

Response to Consultation Paper2

1. Has DCS correctly identified the focus (Strategic context)? Should there be other aspects considered?2

2. Has DCS correctly identified the proposed approach? Should there be other aspects considered?3

3. Has DCS correctly identified guiding principles? Should there be other aspects considered?....4

4. Are there particular gaps, suggested changes or conversely areas you think may need greater attention or emphasis in respect to women offenders and prisoners?4

5. What do you consider are the top 5 priority environment and service development agendas that you think DCS should focus on in forward years for women offenders and prisoners?5

About the Victim Support Service

VSS is a statewide non-government community service organisation which provides free practical support, counselling and information services for adult crime victims. VSS also advocates for victims' rights and community safety. We provide nearly 30,000 responses to victims each year, of which nearly 3,000 are new referrals.

VSS is governed by a voluntary Board of Management drawn from a diverse range of professional backgrounds including law, police, counselling, accounting, business, government and human services. The Board also retains a link with crime victims by retaining at least one crime victim/survivor as a Director.

VSS employs a team of staff drawn from the fields of psychology, social work and counselling deployed from one Adelaide office and seven regional offices in South Australia. We provide a comprehensive range of practical and therapeutic services to all adult and older adolescents that have experienced crime, including information, training, counselling, brief intervention and onward referral to specialist agencies. This includes services for individual crime victims, their families, friends and the wider community. A victim does not need to have reported a crime to access VSS services, and victims can contact VSS at any time after the crime – whether it was yesterday, last week or several years ago.

VSS also advocates on behalf of individual clients, and for systemic changes to improve how the criminal justice and the health/welfare systems treat victims of crime.

VSS staff members provide consultancy, training and information to other professionals who work with crime victims.

Additionally, we deploy a team of trained volunteers to provide:

- Court preparation and companionship for victims or prosecution witnesses who attend court;
- Community education talks;
- Information resources for victims and other professionals.

VSS is primarily funded by the Attorney-General from the Victims of Crime Fund. In addition, VSS has been funded by:

- The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse to provide support and counselling services to witnesses throughout the lifespan of the Commission;
- The South Australian Office for Women to provide administrative support for the statewide Family Safety Framework initiative;
- The South Australian Department for Communities and Social Inclusion (DCSI) to improve home security and safety for women who are at high risk from domestic violence.

Response to Consultation Paper

1. Has DCS correctly identified the focus (Strategic context)? Should there be other aspects considered?

VSS supports the areas for strategic focus outlined in the Consultation Paper:

- Reducing the number of women coming through our services
- Use of community based alternatives to custody, where possible
- Women's unique pathways in and out of crime
- Wellbeing and reducing self-harm for women in contact with the correctional system

VSS recommends this list is expanded to include the following:

- Recognising the nexus of victimisation, trauma and offending
- Recognising the risks of reoffending experienced by women post-release from prison and correctional settings, such as:
 - lack of affordable housing
 - impact of criminal record on attaining and keeping employment
 - social stigmatisation
- Facilitating protective factors against reoffending through targeted prevention programs, such as:
 - trauma counselling
 - parenting classes
 - business skills development
 - social networking
 - debt/budget management training
- Recognising the need for women to feel connected to their community post-release

2. Has DCS correctly identified the proposed approach? Should there be other aspects considered?

DCS Approach Statement:

Our responses to women offenders and prisoners take into account their distinct needs, characteristics, life experiences and family circumstances within the broader offender management practice.

VSS supports DCS' recognition that women prisoners and offenders are likely to present with risk and need factors different to those of men; VSS supports a gender informed practice approach.

However, more research of women prisoners and offenders' experiences in South Australian prisons and correctional settings is needed to inform policy and best practice.

There is a distinct need for programs for women to address the underlying causes behind the increasing women prison population and to develop secure pathways for women (and their families) prior to and upon leaving the prison or correction system.ⁱ

Further, Stolen Generations advocates make a strong case for the implementation of specialised programs for Aboriginal women prisoners, particularly women who are members of the Stolen Generation.ⁱⁱ These programs would acknowledge the intersectional needs of Aboriginal women prisoners and offenders. Examples of such programs include, but are not limited to: Arts Programs; access to family history records; interaction with other members of the Stolen Generations community; Talking Circles; access to Aboriginal Visitors; and access to trauma and grief counselling.

VSS recommends that DCS consult the following resources (if they have not already done so) in developing programs for Aboriginal women in prisons and correctional settings:

- *Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework*
- *Stolen Generations Working Partnership Documents*
- *Stolen Generations Education, Dr Norman Sheehan*

3. Has DCS correctly identified guiding principles? Should there be other aspects considered?

VSS support the following principles outlined in the Consultation Paper:

- Gender matters
- Take into account women's desistance and resettlement needs
- Relationships matter
- Environments, services and practices are responsive to the reality of women's lives
- Informed by best practice

We strongly recommend DCS add the following principles:

- Being informed by evidence-based research, as well as best practice
- Mental health matters
- Recovery from trauma matters

4. Are there particular gaps, suggested changes or conversely areas you think may need greater attention or emphasis in respect to women offenders and prisoners?

Best practice in programs and services cannot be achieved without a strong foundation of empirical research. In preparing its response to the DCS Consultation Paper, VSS has found there is a distinct lack of recent empirical research of women's experiences in South Australian prisons and correctional settings.

As such, to support the focus, approach and principles purported by DCS, VSS strongly recommends an independent research institution is commissioned by DCS to conduct an evaluation of services and programs for women prisoners and offenders in South Australia.

The outcome of this project will be empirical evidence to assist DCS determine how well it is complying with best practice standards, and in which areas it could be more responsive to the particular needs of women prisoners and offenders.

5. What do you consider are the top 5 priority environment and service development agendas that you think DCS should focus on in forward years for women offenders and prisoners?

The skills required to live in prison and at the same time hold a thread of connection to the outside world are often not acknowledged, particularly as women exit the prison system and are navigating the uncertain territory between prison and the outside world.ⁱⁱⁱ

VSS acknowledges that DCS has implemented offence specific programs and interventions to prevent recidivism post-release. However, there is a clear gap in programs and interventions designed specifically for women offenders and prisoners. VSS strongly recommends that DCS pay particular attention to the following environment and service development areas in responding to the needs of women:

I. Community-based Offender Group

After release from prison or a correctional setting, it is difficult for many women to reconnect with their family, friends and community. Women prisoners and offenders are often stigmatised for having a criminal record. This can make life on the outside very difficult; with no solid social connection, it can be very hard to find employment, maintain housing, and manage finances. Women who are isolated from their community and support networks may fall back in with other offenders to feel connected to a community, even if this means recidivism.

VSS acknowledges the pioneering work of community-based organisations in promoting the rights and needs of women prisoners and offenders, particularly the work of the Seeds of Affinity Pathways for Women Inc (SOA).^{iv}

SOA works with women in correctional settings and the community to challenge this type of stigmatisation. SOA establish a link between women offenders and prisoners with the outside community while they are in remand; this gives women a connection with society post-release.

VSS strongly recommends that SOA's operations model is used to develop a volunteer-driven Community-based Offender Group.

I. Trauma counselling

Many women prisoners and offenders have experienced trauma in childhood and adulthood. In particular, for women who have experienced sexual abuse or domestic violence, prisons and correctional settings recreate the dynamics of abusive relationships. Consequently, these women face the risk of historical trauma being triggered or exacerbated by their prison experiences.^v

According to the DCS website, current programs delivered by the Adelaide Women's Prison include:

- crisis intervention and support services
- prisoner assessment and sentence planning
- Case Management
- A prison industry program – including textiles, education and vocational training^{vi}

VSS strongly recommends that trauma counselling programs and rehabilitation services specifically for women offenders and prisoners are prioritised by DCS.

Recent New South Wales research has found that 80 per cent of women in jail have a history of sexual abuse and that procedures such as strip searches can exacerbate this trauma.^{vii} Further, the power dynamic between officers and inmates was found to be a common reminder of domestic violence.

To mitigate the effects of trauma on women prisoners and offenders mental and physical health, VSS strongly recommends that DCS implement a trauma and grief counselling service to address the impact of an abusive history on women's wellbeing.

II. Housing management skills

VSS strongly recommends that DCS collaborate with an agency like Housing SA to deliver a range of affordable housing services to women prisoners and offenders. Women who are homeless or who do not have access to stable and affordable housing are not only vulnerable to recidivism, but also to victimisation. To prevent both, VSS recommends that DCS make housing for women post-release a key priority. The current Housing SA model could be adopted to provide a similar service to women prisoners and offenders post release. These services could include:

- A public housing rental service
- Assistance to enter the private rental market
- Specialised housing programs
- A homelessness and emergency housing service^{viii}

III. Financial management skills

Training women in the skills to manage their finances upon release should be a priority service development area for DCS. VSS strongly recommends that women prisoners and offenders are given access to a Financial Management Officer (FMO) while in custody and after release. An FMO would prepare women for release by equipping them with financial management skills, such as managing a household budget and managing bills and debt repayments (eg, rent, mortgage, utilities, education fees etc).

IV. Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)

TVET is usually based on manual or practical activities related to a specific occupation or trade. In Australia, TVET is generally provided by registered training organisations such as TAFE SA. VSS strongly recommends that DCS prepare women offenders and prisoners for release from custody by providing a TVET service to increase women's chances of employability post-release.

V. Job seeking skills

Many women who are released from custody are unemployed or do not have a reliable source of income. VSS strongly recommends that DCS implement a service or program which provides women with job seeking skills to give them a better chance of finding employment upon release. Examples of Job Seeking Skills include:

- Self-advocacy
- Presentation and grooming
- Interview skills
- How to prepare a resume and cover letter
- Information about wage standards and conditions of employment
- Linking in with government-run job seeking services, eg Centrelink

References

- ⁱ Zita Adut Deng Ngor, 'Snapshot of Women in South Australian Prisons' in 'Childhood Sexual Assault' in Captive Minds... Truth Behind Bars: Realities of Women's Imprisonment in South Australia (2014), Seeds of Affinity Pathways for Women Inc (Welland, South Australia): 13.
- ⁱⁱ Heather Kamarra Shearer, 'Stolen Generations' in 'Childhood Sexual Assault' in Captive Minds... Truth Behind Bars: Realities of Women's Imprisonment in South Australia (2014), Seeds of Affinity Pathways for Women Inc (Welland, South Australia): 17.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Mann (2014): 18.
- ^{iv} VSS recommends that DCS consult a highly informative resource published by SOA in, entitled 'Captive Minds: Truth Behind Bars: Realities of Women's Imprisonment in South Australia'.
- ^v Sue Mann, 'Childhood Sexual Assault' in Captive Minds... Truth Behind Bars: Realities of Women's Imprisonment in South Australia (2014), Seeds of Affinity Pathways for Women Inc (Welland, South Australia): 18.
- ^{vi} Department for Correctional Services, 'Adelaide Women's Prison' (2010), <<http://www.corrections.sa.gov.au/prisons/adelaide-womens-prison>>
- ^{vii} ABC News, 'Sexual assault victims in women's prisons 're-traumatised' by procedures, strip searches', < <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-11-08/reform-push-for-traumatised-women-behind-bars/5080044>>
- ^{viii} Department for Communities and Social Inclusion, Housing SA , <<http://dcsi.sa.gov.au/services/housing-sa>>